

The Winnipeg Sun

Winnipeg, MB

Dailies (322)

Circulation: 50,000

01 Mar 99 310691



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6205 Experts warn users of lack of e-mail privacy

VANCOUVER (CP) — The 'e' in e-mail stands for electronic, but it might just as well be short for "everybody."

"Whatever you put in your e-mail you should be happy to have anybody else read," says Prof. Douglas Stinson of the Centre for Applied Cryptographic Research at the University of Waterloo.

"There isn't any privacy associated with e-mail. Anyone who monitors the computer system (Internet provider) can look at all the e-mail that's sent through it."

Several high-profile incidents recently have prompted experts like Stinson to remind users that someone may be watching.

Lawyers are finding e-mails a great source of information, subpoenaing them if necessary.

That was the painful lesson for CBC-TV reporter Terry Milewski, whose e-mails to an APEC demonstrator after the 1997 economic conference were subpoenaed and brought up at the subsequent inquiry into alleged RCMP abuse.

More recently, navy Capt. David Marshall was temporarily relieved as base commander at CFB Esquimalt for allegedly sending steamy e-mails on his base computer to a woman.

The RCMP is investigating its own internal e-mail system after a graphic sex cartoon was sent through it.

Police believe it was an inside job since the force's system is inaccessible to the outside.

Then there was the famous e-mail sent by one of the Los Angeles police officers on trial in the Rodney King beating.

"Oop\$, I haven't beaten anyone so bad in a long time," the e-mail said.

Jim Carroll, author of the Canadian Internet Handbook, is constantly amazed at what people will say in an e-mail.

The oft-repeated cardinal rule is: "E-mail has as much security as a postcard."

Essentially, there are two types of e-mail, he says — company and Internet.

Internal company systems have existed for a long time, but eventually companies plugged their systems into Internet e-mail to communicate with other companies and customers.

"There are people in companies who are sending e-mail through the Internet who aren't aware that it isn't subject to (internal) security like it would be in a private company," says Carroll, a Mississauga, Ont., resident recognized as one of

Canada's Internet experts.

"It could be at some risk."

Sending a so-called private e-mail from one friend to another through the Internet means there is really no security.

"It goes through a number of providers and a geek at any one of those companies can read it," says Carroll.

People often say things on e-mail they would never commit to paper, says Carroll, mentioning the CBC's Milewski and the current anti-trust suit in the U.S. involving Microsoft.

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